Living History
NEWSLETTER
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Oral History

When I took over this job from Barbara Bond I warned her that while I had reasonable experience in Life Story and Reminiscence, I was a complete beginner on the third aspect, Oral History. Barbara was happy to settle for two out of three but I realised that I needed to find out more about all that oral history entails.

I've had a lot of help from Jennifer Simpson, who's the national SLP co-ordinator. She's involved in a project with Essex Record Office which was willing to provide training for the Southend Network and they were kind enough to allow me to join in with these sessions.

We had one all-day workshop on why, how, where, when would you want to do oral history? – very useful but quite exhausting! The second session was on using the Audacity software, to edit the recordings once the interviews have been done.
See my notes on the first session at the end of this newsletter but for Audacity you really need to try it out for yourself – it's free software.

I've also included notes from a talk at the British Library last winter, on Family History and Archiving Oral History. I do hope you find them useful.

Life Story – how do you end it?

This is an area I've skirted round up to now, both in my own group and when doing a talk on it. But recently a group I was speaking to wanted to investigate it and there were some very interesting contributions. One was from someone who'd done work in a hospice - he explained that people may want to disclose something at the end of life that for various reasons they've been unable to do before. Another couple had already written their own eulogies but realised that in the meantime they could put them at the end of their current writing, to act as a finishing point whenever it stopped.

I've done something similar with mine – I found a quotation years ago which now gets added to the end of the current year I'm writing about - *To live is to walk backwards through life, seeing what has gone, trusting or expecting what is to come, and not always being right. Death will be the last backward step over the cliff edge.* (If anyone knows where it comes from I'd be interested – I couldn't find it using google).

By good luck, just after this, I met a U3A member who's a humanist funeral celebrant and I'm hoping that she'd willing to help if I get any queries in this area which are beyond me. Life Story as therapy is another area I don't have experience in and I guess funeral planning might come under that heading.

Memory Keepsakes

On a lighter note, I recently went along to a session our local Adult Education was running on creating memories through craft. They were a bit puzzled because I didn't want to make anything – where would I find the time! – but I talked to people and picked up some ideas which I've listed below.

Cushion cover collage using up those odd scraps you can't bear to throw away – less ambitious than a quilt – and you could include buttons and small bits of jewellery.

Patchwork – always a favourite for preserving scraps of material from cherished garments. .

Collage – this is moving towards scrapbooking in commemorating a particular event or occasion – there are so many items available for enhancing a layout.

A fabric album – this one came from a member of my group – she's used a full page photo album for fabric samples from her own life and written a history and explanation for each piece.

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I'm still looking for email contacts for the many groups where I have the name but no email. If you know of any other groups in this area of interest, do please pass this newsletter along to them.

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Notes on talk – **Family History and Archived Oral Histories**
Feed the Mind series - lunchtime research talks at British Library – 30th **October 2017**

Imagine hearing the voice of a long-lost relative for the first time. Mary Stewart (British Library) and Cynthia Brown (Oral History Society)discuss how oral history recordings can add rich content to family research.

www.bl.uk/oralhistory   www.ohs.org.uk

Oral History as a Source of Family History
- Occupations – can supply processes of manufacturing industries, work conditions and the workplace hierarchy, social aspects, works outings etc.
- Where your ancestor lived – local and regional variations.
- What was it like? – details of daily life such as overcrowding, sanitation, size of families
- Events through which they lived – local as well as national – the last tram and sporting triumphs as well as General Strike, moon landing, coronation etc
- How did they speak? – hearing the genuine accent, especially for other regions – may not be your ancestor but they will have spoken in the same way.

If you find an ancestor who's been interviewed -
- You'll have questions but there'll probably be no-one to answer them.
- The power of the voice if the person was known to you – the emotional hit is far greater than reading the same words as a transcript.

- If the interviewer was a stranger, much easier to keep sensitive subjects secret but a skilled interviewer may be able to reveal new information.
- An interview can sometimes be used to benefit the person who originally gave it – eg if the subject later develops dementia.
- A key fact, eg that the family was Jewish, may be deliberately concealed or may be too obvious to mention even if the interviewer is unaware of it.

Family Members in Archival Recording
- Online access becoming more common (the British Library has just had £10m from the Heritage Lottery Fund for digitisation).
- Interviewees and those they may mention are not anonymised.
- Most likely that mention of a named family member will be in an interview with someone else.
- This can produce tricky situations – 'he said *what* about my dad!?'

Ethics
- 2,500 whole life interviews
- In the case of sensitive subjects, who has the right of reply?
- Need for empathy but should not avoid contentious subjects.
- Need to - convey context in a pithy manner
    improve understanding of oral history
    manage feedback
    strengthen links between archives, oral histories and web developers

Questions arising from talk

- *Who has the right of reply?*
Very difficult to decide – need to work on case by case basis – does a child of the interviewee have the right to remove, edit, etc – does a grandchild? An item might be taken down, perhaps for an agreed period, but it won't be destroyed – it will still be in the archive – or occasionally an explanatory footnote could be added to the summary.

- *Is there a difference between being interviewed by a family member or a stranger?*
This can work both ways – new information may come out in either case, though perhaps for different reasons. The questions are likely to be different as the family member will share assumed knowledge which a stranger would either have to find or may be unaware of.

- *Could there be a disclaimer by the website, that this is only the view of the person?*
This is an ongoing discussion with web developers, who tend to dislike the pop-up box which would be most effective for this purpose.

- *Are interviews ever closed without a complaint?*
Yes, if the interviewee is clearly libellous, racist, homophobic etc. The interviewee also has control over how the material is used – they might ask for a section to be kept back for twenty years – and have the right to change their mind and let it be released.

- *How far back do you have oral history recordings?*
The earliest (at BL?) are from 1890s, on waxed cylinders, but the earliest bulk collection is from 1950s, being recordings taken then but of events back to early 20th century or even 19th

- *How do you decide who to interview?*

The BL recordings are often industry based, and not just the glamorous ones – they've just done a study of the electricity supply industry.

- *How much of this work is going on in other countries?*

There is a lot of work in US, Australia, Ireland and Eastern Europe. The recent grant from HLF should help to keep BL at the forefront.

See also National Life Stories – based at British Library.
www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories

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ORAL HISTORY TRAINING DAY   11.4.18   ESSEX RECORD OFFICE

Purpose of oral history
- to record information
- to show change of culture
- to preserve dialects
- to record very local history, customs, etc
- to record the sort of trivia that would never get written down
- a voice for the (functionally) illiterate

Aim of the current project
   To update the recordings on the Southend Listening Bench and in the longer term facilitate the formation of an oral history group

Who to interview?
- Advertise – via U3A, Facebook, community websites, care homes, libraries…..
- Will always be self selecting – random respondents not applicable
- Project creep – as in 'you must speak to…' – important to keep aims in mind
- Individual, pair or group? – risk of dominant speaker, (esp with married couple?)
- 1 or 2 interviewers? – 2 + 2 may make for conversation rather than interview
- Watch for imbalances – male/female, education levels, local/incomer

Subject of interview
   Define this from the start – in this case the pier is central but will probably cover background material on fishing and shipping. In some cases may be a limit on time scale.

The Interview
- May be whole life story or a specific selection by subject or date
- Need consistency across interviewers within the same project
- Preparation – need to know some background to save explanations in interview
- Checklist beforehand – equipment, address, details of interviewee
- Start with name of both parties, place & date and ask for date and place of birth
- Have prepared questions but be flexible
- Use open ended questions but may need specifics to get dates etc
- Typical interview about an hour
- Place – need privacy and comfort – interviewee's home may have sound distractions
- Possible problems – clock, traffic noise, pets, TV, radio, fan – need to ask to remove
- Soft furnishings better than hard surfaces

- Turn your phone off – if theirs rings stop the recording (and state reason on tape)
- Develop your own style of interviewing – practise to remove annoying habits
- Don't interrupt!

What to ask
- Start with general background – siblings, school, job etc
- After that avoid specifics, stay open ended, avoid leading questions
- Silence is ok – allows interviewee time to consider and remember something more
- Try to get dates, places etc
- Definitions eg 'the war' – in future this won't be as clear as it is now
- Don't go on too long – tiring for both parties
- Don't rush off at end of recording – wind down, chat, repeat how it will be used

TECHNICAL

Zoom H1 Handy Recorder v.2.0 and separate accessory pack www.zoom.co.jp
Each stop of recording will start a new track which can make things easier to find. It won't over write
Card or USB to save files so they can be transferred to computer
Takes 1AA battery – always start interview with new battery
Copy recording to computer as soon as possible, then delete from recorder for next session
Edit using Audacity – free download *[session on this later in summer]*
Always keep the Master Copy intact – make copies to edit. Memory stick for transfer?
Using a mobile phone is a possibility – depends on quality and portability (transfer)

COPYRIGHT & ETHICS

Copyright [see form in file]
- Organisation doing recording eg ERO will hold copyright of format for 50 years
- Content belongs to interviewee for 70 years after death (like books)
- Copyright release form gives more explanation

Ethics
- Must get informed consent (use form designed for individual project)
- Transparency during recording – say when you start or stop – red light makes it clear
- May reveal sensitive information eg naming names
- Not obliged to report anything illegal revealed (apart from terrorism)
- Interviewee has moral right of attribution even when copyright is transferred
- Interviewee can put restrictions eg to keep private for 30 years, for their lifetime etc.

MANAGING & PRESENTING

- Original is master copy – DO NOT EDIT
- Make other copies for specific purpose
- Memory sticks not reliable in long term, good for transfer
- Store on computer or using Dropbox
- Naming/filing system – spreadsheet with all details for whole project?
- Interview Summary sheet (in file)
- Summary of interview with time points marked – ease of finding – index words